

RESEARCH BRIEF

The Challenge of Reinventing High School *by Rhonda Barton*

Each school day, more than 600,000 teenagers show up for classes in the Northwest's 1,500 public high schools. But for too many of them, the promise of a high school education rings hollow. "More than two-thirds of American kids aren't getting what they need or deserve in high school," declares Tom Vander Ark, the former Federal Way, Washington, school superintendent who now heads the education program of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "A third of them drop out, another third leave ill-prepared for college and work: What we're doing is a disaster."

Vander Ark isn't alone in pointing a finger at a system that's failing to meet the needs of a knowledge-based economy and a society with increased educational expectations. A report by the National High School Alliance, issued in May 2004, concludes that "as a crucial link in the K-16 pipeline, the American High School is leaking with the magnitude of the catastrophic *Valdez* spill." The Alliance, a Washington, D.C.-based partnership of more than 40 organizations, identified seven "key levers of change" to address the crisis:

- Connect K-12 and postsecondary education
- Make college preparation the "default" curriculum for all high school students
- Improve teacher preparation and professional development
- Ensure all students can read at or above grade level
- Address the high dropout rate
- Promote smaller, more personalized learning environments
- Make state academic content standards more flexible

Failure to make changes comes at a high cost in both personal and civic terms. An analysis by Professor Sam Stringfield of Johns Hopkins University shows that today's young high school dropout earns less than half as much as the average high school dropout of 25 years ago, in inflation-adjusted dollars. In addition, the economic advantage of obtaining a college education today is more than four times as great as it was 50 years ago.

On a broader level, a well-educated citizenry is needed to fuel the nation's economic growth. Economist Anthony Carnevale of the Educational Testing Service estimates that if current economic and demographic trends continue, by 2020 the nation will need up to 14 million more workers with some college training than the education system currently produces.

THE NEW THREE R'S

In summits from Billings, Montana, to Boston, Massachusetts, the U.S. Department of Education has promulgated its own high school initiative—"Preparing America's Future"—which calls on states to identify strategies, stakeholders, and technical

assistance needed to improve the quality of high school education for *all* students. At the first of seven regional meetings, Susan Sclafani, Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education and counselor to Secretary Rod Paige, reflected on the fact that 50 years ago a high school education provided entrée to the workforce. "There were jobs for people who didn't feel motivated or who weren't successful in their education," she told an audience of several hundred at Montana State University last March. "Today there's just not a place for young people who come out of school without the requisite knowledge and skills."

The remedy, Sclafani asserts, lies in the three R's that have become a mantra of the high school reform movement: rigor, relevance, and relationships. "What we need to do," says Sclafani, "is create the communities in (our) schools that say for every child—including those who come to you not having gone through your school system or who come to you well behind grade level—figure out what they need and help them to get there."

WHY SIZE MATTERS

Just how to make that happen is fueling a national debate: Should large schools be razed and replaced by new, smaller institutions or can they be broken apart into autonomous units coexisting under one roof? Should the restructuring happen overnight or over time? Is being small enough? And, just how small is small?

While it may take a generation or more to authoritatively answer some of those questions, research dating back as far as the 1960s supports the belief that more personal schools can make all the difference. Diana Oxley, in the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's forthcoming *Small Learning Communities: Implementing and Deepening Practice*, concludes that, "Research and experience have led small learning communities and small schools advocates to espouse a similar basic notion of small unit schooling: An interdisciplinary team of teachers shares a few hundred (or less) students in common and responsibility for their educational progress; provides instruction for a large part of their instructional day in a physical space devoted to this purpose; and exercises maximum flexibility to act on knowledge of students' needs."

Such environments are more apt to foster autonomy, competence, and interrelatedness: three qualities that consistently come out on top in studies of what people need to thrive. According to a 2001 study by Kennon M. Sheldon and his

colleagues—reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*—individuals need to feel that they’re the cause of their own actions; that they’re capable and effective; and that they have regular contact with people who care about them.

Kathleen Cotton’s often-quoted 1996 synthesis—*School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance*—concludes that academic achievement in small schools is “at least equal and often superior to that of larger schools.” After analyzing 69 separate studies, Cotton found that small schools exhibit more positive student attitudes and social behavior; better attendance; lower dropout rates; greater parental involvement; and higher participation in extracurricular activities.

Mary Anne Raywid has also written extensively on the benefits of small schools. In *Educational Leadership* (1997), she points out that a number of large-scale studies, involving thousands of students, document the effects of school size. “The findings of these studies reveal an unusual consistency,” she reports. Among the findings: low-income students in small schools significantly outperformed those in large schools on standardized tests of basic skills; size had more influence on student achievement than any other factor controllable by educators; and youngsters—especially disadvantaged ones—learn more in math, reading, history, and science in small schools than in large ones.

Small Schools: Great Strides, a two-year study of some 150 new small schools in Chicago by the Bank Street College of Education, looked at a variety of school performance indicators such as dropout rates, attendance, and standardized test scores. Patricia Wasley and her colleagues discovered that smallness in and of itself is not enough: for example, it needs to be accompanied by high-quality curriculum and instruction. However, smallness does pave the way for a variety of conditions that lead to improved student achievement.

“Consistent with nationwide findings, our research found that small schools create communities where students are known, encouraged, and supported,” the study states. “Students are aware of their value in these communities and, as a result, are more inclined to be responsive to teachers and responsible as students.” In such a setting, teachers are more satisfied professionally, likely to collaborate with colleagues, and able to build a coherent program among disciplines and across grades.

DEMANDING MORE

Regardless of whether students are bound for college or the workforce, a challenging curriculum is critical. “High schools can no longer act as sorting machines, preparing some students for postsecondary education and some for the world of work,” says the National Commission on the High School Senior Year in its 2001 report. “The conditions of modern life demand that all students graduate from a rigorous academic program that equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in both postsecondary education and careers.”

A strong academic curriculum in high school is the biggest factor in determining whether students earn a bachelor’s degree, according to a 1999 study by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Completing a rigorous course of study proved to be a better predictor of success than test scores, grade-point averages, or class rank. The study, which followed a national cohort of students for 13 years starting in 10th grade, also found that an intensive curriculum had the most impact for black and Hispanic youth.

The *High Schools That Work* model—designed by the Southern Regional Education Board—calls for a core of college-prep classes as well as challenging vocational/technical studies. But the courses themselves can’t exist in a vacuum. In a study of why some of their sites raised student achievement more than others, SREB found that besides “clear and high” expectations, successful schools offered an involved guidance and counseling system; focused staff development; district support; and formal alignment with both middle schools and postsecondary institutions. Students also could rely on “access to a structured system of extra help and extra time.”

MAKING IT REAL

While relationships and rigor are critical components, advocates of reform argue that relevance must also be part of the formula. The American Diploma Project—launched by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation; Achieve, Inc.; and the Education Trust—is weighing in with updated requirements that align high school curricula with the demands of college and the workplace. In examining what’s needed to restore value to the high school diploma, the project suggests that “state policymakers need to anchor graduation requirements and assessments to the standards of the real world ... and in return, colleges and employers need to start honoring and rewarding student achievement on state standards-based assessments by using these performance data in their admissions, placements, and hiring decisions.”

Fred Newmann, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, argues that schools should promote “authentic” academic achievement that involves active student inquiry into real-world problems and higher order thinking rather than mere repetition of memorized facts. “To maximize the probability that students’ school achievements have adaptive benefits they must have some value beyond certifying success in school,” notes Newmann in *Issues in Restructuring Schools* (1995). In a study of 24 restructured schools, Newmann and his colleagues found that “authentic pedagogy” yields improved student performance regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

The challenge of creating a new vision for high schools—one that works for all students—is daunting. But, as the Carnegie Corporation points out, “this highly compelling and vital issue is the clarion call of our new century.” Almost two centuries after the first public high school opened in the United States, there’s more agreement than ever that it’s time to retool this critical institution. ■